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Gay identity and the experience of work: An interpretative phenomenological analysis

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ABSTRACT

Links between homosexuality and poor health-outcomes are believed to be, in part at least, related to the stress of sexual identity concealment and stigma in the workplace (King, *et al.* 2008). Given the substantial number of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people in the British workforce and the relative lack of research in this area, a qualitative study was conducted to explore personal experiences of minority sexual identity and stigma in the workplace. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with n=5 self-identified gay men and lesbian women who varied in their degree of openness about their sexuality at work. Verbatim transcripts of interviews were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The analysis produced four global themes: Negative affect from being stereotyped; Strategies employed to manage sense of identity; Awareness and visibility; and Sexuality as a 'special status'. A description of these themes and their subordinate themes is presented using extracts from participant interviews and drawing on the existing literature in the areas of stereotyping and prejudice, identity theory, stigma theory, and minority stress. Negative findings about the emotional impact of being stereotyped, the stress of identity management in a heterocentric working situation, and problems of forced disclosure, were some of the key negative findings in line with existing research, however more encouraging findings emerged which suggest that GL employees view being "out" as a positive status that is beneficial not only to the individual but to the organisational culture itself.

KEY WORDS:	SEXUALITY	IDENTITY	IPA	DISCRIMINATION	WORKPLACE

Introduction

1.1. Overview

In April 1963, as the voice of the American Civil Rights Movement, Dr. Martin Luther King stated that Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. His words were a warning to a nation divided by racial discrimination enshrined in both culture and law, and a world that permits such prejudice, that until nations eradicate discrimination for everyone, all members of society are at risk from the brutality that such ignorance breeds. Whether based on visible factors such as sex, ethnicity or physical disability, or less visible factors such as social class sexual orientation, or group membership (according to religion or occupation, for example), sweeping categorization and negative treatment of people based on arbitrary criteria is an injustice with no deserving place in 21st century society.

The two broad demographic identifiers mentioned above - the visible and the less visible - have been widely used as a basis for social categorization and self-identification for as long as people have formed complex social groups. Whilst the world today is moving slowly but definitely toward a unified acceptance of the abhorrence of racial discrimination, and much – but by no means all – of the world is moving slowly but definitely in a positive direction with regard to equality for women, discrimination against people of non-heterosexual sexual orientation is on the rise across the world. In 2012 itself, Russia introduced laws making it illegal to even write or speak publicly about homosexuality in St. Petersburg, with a view to making this a national law, and in Iran, Uganda, and many other countries, homosexual acts are punishable by imprisonment and even death.

In Britain, whilst the situation is far more rational, with all people protected from overt discrimination by such laws as the 2010 Equalities Act, ignorance persists, with much of contemporary prejudicial behaviour occurring subtly and through acts of omission rather than commission. One arena where this is likely to prove particularly challenging for Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual (LGB) people is the workplace, where "office politics" can prove a minefield for most people at some point during their working lives without the added problems of culturally entrenched negative biases based on sexuality or any other criteria. This dissertation will review the literature on minority sexual identity in workplace settings and, using the qualitative methodologies of semi-structured and IPA analysis, will explore the lived experience of gay and lesbian people in the workplace.

Given the significant prejudice faced by this minority, both currently and throughout history, many are still not comfortable being totally open about their sexual orientation, which makes estimates of numbers difficult to arrive at. Contemporary figures range from 1.5% of the adult population given in 2010 by the office for national statistics (ONS) to between 5% and 7% given by Stonewall in 2011. With the current UK population at 63 million, this means that somewhere between 0.95 and 4.4 million people in Britain today either privately or publicly identify as LGB. With the same organizations estimating that between 4% and 17% of the British workforce is lesbian, gay, or bisexual, LGB people are one of the largest but least studied minority groups in the world of work (Gonsiorek & Weinrich, 1991).

Researchers have only recently started to understand the importance of studying this 'invisible group': Given that is it believed that most LGB employees do not fully reveal their sexual identity at work even if there is legal protection in place, Croteau (1996) estimated that between 25% and 66% of LGB employees experience discrimination in the workplace, though Ragins & Cornwell (2001) argue that this estimate is likely to be conservative as reports of sexual identity vary according to, amongst many other factors, respondent sex, age, and developmental stage (Martin & Knox, 2000).

Discrimination and social rejection have been found to be related to an increase in mental disorders in the LGB population, as many report more psychological distress than heterosexuals despite similar levels of social support and physical health (King, et al. 2008). Gay men and bisexual people in particular have demonstrated higher levels of mental distress in comparison to heterosexuals, and it is suggested that depression, self-harm, suicidal feelings, and rates of drug and alcohol misuse are more common in this group than in the population as a whole (Ibid).

1.2 Definitions in the literature

The very definition of sexual orientation has changed considerably over the past 50 years. (Ragins & Wietoff, 2005). Early definitions used a simple bipolar behavioral perspective: individuals were classified as heterosexual or homosexual based on whether they engaged in sexual relations with someone of the same biological sex (Kinsey *et al.* 1948, 1953). This perspective has a number of limitations: Firstly, a behavioral perspective assumes that identity is linked to behavior and ignores the fact that individuals may engage in same-sex sexual behaviours without viewing themselves as gay; For example, adolescents may engage in same-sex sexual experimentation while maintaining a heterosexual identity. In addition, some cultures may not view same-sex sexual acts as displays of homosexuality (Schmitt & Sofer, 1992). Secondly, individuals may self-identify as gay but, like heterosexuals, may choose to be celibate and abstain from all sexual behaviours. Thirdly, even the expanded version of this is overly simplistic if it views sexual orientation as a single dimension with three discrete stages ranging from heterosexuality through bisexuality to homosexuality; a view which ignores the complexities of bisexuality and excludes altogether transgendered, transsexual and asexual individuals (Horowitz & Newcomb, 2001).

The term "homophobia" was fashioned by the psychologist George Weinberg in the 1970s and was used to describe an irrational fear of, and hate for, homosexual individuals (Herek, 2004). For the purpose of this study, homophobia is conceptualized according to the definitions which Cramer (2002. p.2) offers, where homophobia is seen as the "fear, disgust, hatred, and/or avoidance of lesbians and gay men and bisexuals. Behavioral manifestations of homophobic feelings and beliefs include anti-gay discrimination and anti-gay hate crimes."

Heterosexism and homophobia are often used interchangeably, but they represent two different constructs. Heterosexism involves anti-gay attitudes, prejudice, and discriminatory behaviours that derive from a hetero-centric view of the world (Sears, 1997). Like racism or sexism, heterosexism is manifested not only through individual behaviours but also through institutional, cultural and legal values (Herek, 1990).

Cramer (2002, p.2) defines heterosexism as the "expectation that all persons should be, or are, heterosexual; the belief that heterosexual relations are normal and the norm. These expectations and beliefs occur on individual, institutional, and cultural levels. The behavioral manifestations of heterosexist beliefs include denying marriage licenses for same-sex couples and restricting [marriage based] health and retirement benefits to those in heterosexual marriages."

Individuals may engage in heterosexist behaviors without being homophobic, or may experience homophobic feelings without displaying heterosexist behaviours (Jung & Smith, 1993). A direct comparison can be made between heterosexism and racism: Individuals can and do engage in racist behaviours for reasons other than fear; prejudice may be based on self-interest, personal beliefs, or on group, social or institutional norms (Allport, 1954), but just because someone holds racist views does not necessarily mean that they will act with prejudice.

The distinction between homophobia and heterosexism has important implications for organizations. Like racism, heterosexism may be institutionalized and have little to do with an individual employee's phobia. There is institutionalized heterosexism in organizations which lack policies that prohibit sexual orientation discrimination, and in companies that do not provide the same worker benefits for LGB and heterosexual employees; the default assumption is a heterocentric one, where people who do not fit the perceived norm are not even considered in policy decisions and it is precisely this sort of discrimination that occurs most frequently and is considered discrimination by omission rather than commission (Avery *et al.* 2008).

1.3 Social Identity - Conflict versus Congruence

A person's social identity is derived from the groups, statuses, and categories that the individual is socially recognized as being a member of (Rosenberg, 1997). Social Categorization Theory (Tajfel, 1981) and Social Identity Theory (Turner, 1982) assert that individuals classify themselves and others using salient and available characteristics, such as age and race, which people in general take at face value on an everyday basis. To illustrate the importance of the role of invisible identity, and the interactions that are specific to LGB individuals within the workplace, the following example is given: A woman requires leave from work because she is going to become a parent. Because she is not pregnant herself, the first heterosexist assumption is that she and her male partner must be going to adopt, when, in fact, it is her female partner who is pregnant and thus she has to 'out' herself in order to receive standard parental benefits (Reinman, 2001). This one example illustrates the potential work-place complexities for LGB people created by the heterocentric occupational setting that still pervades society; complexities which may force individuals to make decisions regarding their identity and self-representation; decision which may cause stress due to fear of negative judgment on the one hand, but on the other, they might simply prefer not to reveal their sexuality at work because they would rather keep their private life to themselves. If fear of being 'outed' is present, the stress associated with concealing a social identity may be amplified and can arguably lead to stress-related illness; the fact that disclosure is not an all-or-nothing phenomenon but happens on a continuum can exacerbate this situation (Cole *et al.* 1996; Smart and Wagner, 1999, 2000).

Ragins (2004) suggests that outcomes of disclosure have three distinct influences on LGB identity. Firstly, sexual identity conflict occurs when the LGB worker discloses his or her sexual identity in one domain but not in another. The clearest case of sexual identity conflict results from strong disclosure-disconnects; the situation in which an individual has disclosed to everyone in one domain, such as work, but no one in another domain, such as their family. Another example is when gay employees not only hide their sexual identity at work but also fabricate heterosexual identities in order to avoid questions and gossip which might increase work related stress and/or interfere with productivity (Button, 2001; Woods, 1993). Secondly, LGB workers may have a consistency in the degree of disclosure across work and home domains, meaning that there are no disclosure-disconnects (Ragins, 2004). The third identity state falls between these two examples and presents a moderate degree of disclosure-disconnect: the gay employee has disclosed his or her sexual identity to some people at work and some people at home. Although this scenario does not represent as intense a case of disclosure-disconnect as the first example of identity conflict, it may still create a strain on the individual's identity (Ibid).

The pattern of secrecy in scenario 1 and 3 above is believed to create a large amount of stress and anxiety for LGB workers (Levine and Leonard, 1984). It has been observed that a great deal of effort is required by LGB workers to conceal their sexual orientation, and that such strategies will result in dissatisfaction, feeling misunderstood, pressured, detached and alienated, perhaps culminating in a desire to leave the organization (Williamson, 1993).

While the prevailing culture of an organisation is a significant factor in how or to what degree a lesbian, gay or bisexual person discloses their sexuality in the workplace, a number of studies have found that that a strong gay identity is a key predictor of the decision to disclose in the workplace. Chrobot-Mason *et al.* (2001) found that employees with a strong homosexual identity were more likely to use integrative strategies and disclose their gay identity at work than those with a weaker sexual identity. Similarly, Button (2001) found that LGB workers who reported strong identification with gay groups were more likely to disclose at work than those lacking such identification. Converse support for this comes from Rostosky and Riggle (2002), who found a significant relationship between reduced disclosure in the workplace and internalized homophobia – the latter reflecting a negative view of one's gay identity.

Ragins (2004) further notes that many LGB employees feel that they do not have control over the disclosure of their invisible stigmatized identities inside or outside the workplace. Those who are not totally out of the closet face the ongoing risk of being "outed" against their will, even if this is done accidentally and without malicious intent. In addition, many LGB workers experience a disconnection in the extent to which they have disclosed their sexual identity at work and at home. These disclosure-disconnects may lead to feelings of loss of control over the disclosure process and may create sexual identity conflict, which in turn leads to stress and other negative work and life attitudes and outcomes (Ibid).

Ragins (2004) expands on this and proposes two moderators which affect outcomes associated with disclosure disconnect: identity salience, and the size of the community. Individuals who define themselves in terms of their sexual orientation

should experience greater sexual identity conflict as a consequence of disclosure disconnects than those who define themselves on the basis of other identities. With regard to community size, Ragins argues that as small communities increase the risk of being involuntarily "outed", they amplify feelings of lack of control over the disclosure process. Finally, it should be noted that LGB employees may be at various stages in the development of their sexual identity over the course of their careers; they may vary on the degree to which they are out at work, out to relatives or friends at home, or even out to themselves.

1.4 Stereotypes and Prejudice

When prejudice occurs, stereotyping and discrimination may also result. In many cases, prejudices are based upon stereotypes. The acceptance of negative stereotypes, exaggerated and fixed beliefs about LGB individuals is strongly correlated with negative attitudes towards them (Allport, 1954). Although both stereotyping and prejudice involve an evaluative process in assigning group membership, there are some differences between them. Researchers have begun to study the cognitive processes thorough which stereotyping occurs (Brewer & Kramer, 1985). Our limited attentions ability means that the many thousands of stimuli our nervous system is forced to process every second far exceeds what we can consciously process, thus split-second decision-making is essential for separating possible threats from potentially beneficial or neutral stimuli in a time-critical manner; the most efficient method for this prioritizing process is the use of schemata, which is typically a very effective survival mechanism. Driven by time pressures in a world crowded with very real threats to safety, this heuristic categorization process is inefficient in that it typically throws forward high rates of false positives, something that is not a problem when assuming that all snakes are venomous, for example, but when such arbitrary grouping rules are applied to people based on sweeping criteria, stereotyping is a common outcome. Snyder (1981, p 83) stated that: "stereotypes result when we categorize people into groups on the basis of some characteristics, attribute additional characteristics to that category, and then attribute these other characteristics individually to all of the group's members".

As a result of this arbitrary grouping process, heterosexuals may often notice only those characteristics of gay people which are congruent with the gay stereotypes, they hold – a process known as selective perception (Gross, 1996), may fail to recall incongruent characteristics retrospectively - selective recall (Snyder, 1981), and may use the content of their stereotypes as the basis for illusory correlations (Chapman 1969); due to these factors, anti-gay stereotypes can prove very resistant to change, even in the face of clear and strong evidence to the contrary. Examples of such negative stereotypes include such as large numbers of gay men and lesbian women are maladjusted, obsessed with sex, and are incapable of long term relationships (Smith and Ingram, 2004).

The content of these stereotypes have been shaped historically by heterocentric cultural norms, often arising from religions that deem homosexuality ungodly, which frame homosexuality as abnormal and threatening, and thus seek to justify the subjugation of this minority group. With homophobic stereotypes having been endlessly reinforced by a heterocentric mass media to the point of ubiquity (Herek, 2004). It is unsurprising that, even in an age of ostensible legal protection from work

place discrimination, many LGB people choose to keep their sexuality to themselves in the work place .One major stereotype, that gay men are 'feminine' and lesbian women are 'masculine' is so prevalent and strong that heterosexual men and women who manifest culturally incongruent gender characteristics are more likely than others to be labeled as 'homosexual' (Deaux & Lewis 1984; Herek, 1984). Furthermore, it has been suggested that lesbian women and gay men who violate stereotypical expectations, as many do, are actually be disliked by some heterosexuals not for their sexuality but due to the discomfort aroused by the cognitive dissonance this lack of conformity to stereotype arouses (Laner & Laner 1979).

1.5 Stigma theory - Assumptions of Heterosexuality, Indirect Discrimination and Disclosure Backlash

According to stigma theory one outcome of an invisible stigma is that the individual is assumed to be a member of the majority group (Goffman, 1963; Jones *et al.*1984). As applied to sexual orientation, LGB employees who have not disclosed their sexual identity are often assumed to be heterosexual by co-workers, supervisors and clients, thus complicating the disclosure decision and their work relationships (Waldo, 1999; Woods, 1993).

Being stigmatized is harmful for targeted individuals because it leads to stereotyping, status-loss, and discrimination (Link & Phelan, 2001). In the workplace Stigma can stifle advancement and personal development opportunities for the stigmatized individual, and can lead to social isolation. It can further interfere with development of relationships critical to networking and career advancement (Day & Schoenrade, 1997; Cox, 1993). These issues have been suggested to lead to poorer job performance, with the worry of job loss as a direct result of prejudice or as a result the consequent negative impact on performance being a common concern for LGB individuals (Woods, 1994).

Given that sexual orientation is invisible, even allowing for the complexities of gender role stereotype incongruence mentioned in section 1.4 the dominance of the heterocentric world view in society as a whole and in most places of employment (where specific equalities training has not been implemented), is understandable. Nonetheless, it is a social construct based on the timeless repression of homosexuality and the active normalization of the idea that homosexuality is not merely counter to the norm but is actually abnormal; all of which adds to the burden of stress for the LGB employee in regard to disclosure in the workplace (Creed & Scully, 2000).

The assumption of heterosexuality creates two unique outcomes for LGB employees. Firstly, it increases the occurrence and impact of "indirect discrimination." Indirect discrimination involves discriminatory actions that have a negative impact on an individual even though the actions are not aimed directly at that individual. This contrasts with direct discrimination, which involves actions aimed at the individual target. Examples of indirect discrimination range from watching negative treatment of other openly gay co-workers to overhearing heterosexist comments and jokes (Ragins, 2004). Ragins also suggests that likelihood of indirect discrimination increases for LGB employees who have not disclosed their sexual

identity due to the fact that the perpetrators of these actions are unaware that their colleague is gay and thus do not censor their comments or actions; in some cases the heterosexist assumptions of the perpetrators of discriminatory behaviour may even expect their gay colleagues to participate in these discriminatory actions.

Again, in such situations as this, the invisibility of stigma contributes to assumptions of heterosexuality, which in turn increases the probability and intensity of indirect discrimination experienced by "closeted" LGB employees. Indirect discrimination is therefore a unique outcome of the invisibility of stigma, the decision not to disclose a gay identity at work, and co-worker's assumptions of heterosexuality, and considering these factors, it is reasonable to expect that many LGB employees will experience such indirect discrimination numerous times during their working lives. In addition, the impact of indirect discrimination may be more intense for closeted LGB employees as they recognize that the perpetrator's actions reflect their uncensored feelings and intentions; factors which may remain hidden from the openly gay person (Ragins, 2004).

Ragins & Cornwall (2001) further suggest that the presence of other individuals who have publicly revealed their sexual orientation is likely to support others in this decision to reveal, especially if they have observed that their sexually open colleagues have not suffered any negative consequences as a result of their disclosure. Conversely individuals are more likely to not disclose their stigmas if it appears that other LGB individuals are also hiding their differences.

The second outcome associated with the assumption of heterosexuality is that it may force LGB employees to make disclosure decisions before they are ready, for example: a gay employee who is new to an organisation may want to "test the waters" before disclosing his sexual identity to his heterosexual co-workers. Having established that he has a partner and that he will be attending the upcoming office party, the co-workers assume that he will be bringing his girlfriend, something implied in the language they use in discussion about the party. At this point, the gay employee has two choices; firstly he can say nothing and not correct the misconception that he is heterosexual. This may not only have a negative effect on his self-esteem (Meyer, 2003), but it may also increase the negative reactions, or disclosure backlash from his co-workers once his true identity is revealed.

Specifically, once his true identity is revealed, his co-workers may feel misled, threatened, manipulated, and even ashamed if they have engaged in homophobic prejudice in his presence due to their heterosexist assumptions; feelings which can result in strained or dysfunctional working relationships. Disclosure backlash therefore has both emotional and behavioral components that revolve around anger, hurt, withdrawal and retaliation. The gay employee's second choice is to disclose his sexual identity as soon as he realizes his co-workers' assumptions, irrespective of whether it is an opportune time or whether he feels comfortable sharing this personal part of his identity with his co-workers. Unfortunately, this immediate disclosure may also yield behavioural backlash from co-workers, most commonly in the form of accusations that the gay employee is "flaunting his sexual orientation" (Friskop & Silverstein, 1996; Woods, 1994).

1.6 Review of literature - Sexuality in the Workplace

Woods (1993) identified three strategies LGB employees use to manage their sexual identity at work; the first of these is called "counterfeiting". This is where the worker actively constructs a heterosexual identity, and may even go to such lengths as bringing an opposite-gender individual to company social events in order to appear heterosexual. This strategy, also known as "passing", involves active deception about one's sexual identity (Griffin, 1992). The second strategy the LGB individual may employ is "avoidance", in which they attempt to evade the issue of their sexuality by self-editing, censoring, and telling half-truths; they may maintain a social distance and avoid any discussion of their personal lives, and some individuals may even appear asexual in the attempt to ward off questions about their sexuality. The third strategy LGB workers may use is "integration", where they openly disclose their sexual identity. This usually involves direct verbal disclosures such as simply telling people outright and immediately correcting heterosexist assumptions, indirect verbal disclosures such as referring to their partner by gender just as heterosexual people frequently do, and may also involve bringing same-gender partners to organizational events and displaying pictures of partners in work settings.

In another qualitative study of 70 gay male professionals, Woods (1994) also found that the majority of the workers had sought to avoid discrimination by posing as heterosexual at some point in their careers. Woods observes that the use of avoidance and counterfeiting strategies isolate gay employees and restrict their ability to develop genuine, open and trusting relationships with subordinates, co-workers and superiors. Those who rely on avoidance strategies may be viewed as antisocial by co-workers who misinterpret the sex protection strategy for aloofness, which presents yet one more factor suggesting that counterfeiting a heterosexual identity is stressful, consumes a considerable psychological energy and thus likely impacts negatively on both psychological health and productivity(Chrobot-Mason *et al.* 2001) however, cautions that measurement of disclosure is complex and the results should be interpreted with caution as individuals may rely on a combination of strategies in the workplace, for example: LGB workers may use an integrative strategy with some co-workers, avoiding strategies with others, and counterfeiting strategies with more distant colleagues or with clients.

Woods (1994) and Ragins *et al.* (2001) present mixed findings regarding the impact of discrimination in one place of work on the decision to disclose in future positions. Woods reports that heightened awareness through past experiences of workplace discrimination could inhibit disclosure in future positions, but Ragins *et al.* (2001) found that even with the increased fears about disclosing brought about by prior experience of discrimination, many LGB workers who had previously disclosed were still more likely to go public about their sexuality than those who did not have these experiences with discrimination. This suggests that while a history of discrimination heightens the perception of the risk associated with disclosure, once LGB workers are out of the closet, they may not be willing to relinquish their identity. This is likely to be due in part to the confidence about handling discrimination that will have been gained in dealing with prejudiced colleagues, and is also arguably due to the empowering sense of self that can be found in being true to oneself.

Although the above studies found that a strong internal sense of gay identity is an important predictor of disclosure in the workplace, some literature point to the influence of environmental factors on disclosure decisions (Cain, 1991; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Cain observed in his study that decisions regarding disclosure are not just due to the individual's identity development but are shaped by powerful social influences and the anticipated response of others in the social environment. In support of this idea, his interviews with 38 gay men revealed that disclosure was guided by the anticipation of potentially negative consequences of disclosure within a social context, and that these anticipated consequences were distinct from gay identity development. Cain concluded that individuals who are open about their sexual orientation are not necessarily more developmentally advanced than those who conceal it, and that concealment in a non-supportive environment may be a very effective strategy for self-preservation; a strategy which may be employed by a more developmentally advanced and socially astute individual in a situation where a less astute gay person may disclose prematurely to their own emotional detriment.

One of the primary predictors of heterosexism in the workplace is the presence and implementation of strong and cohesive organizational policies and practices that provide a positive climate for LGB and other minority workers - or the opposite of these factors. In a study of n=537 LGB employees, Button (2001) found that the presence of affirming organizational policies was associated with fewer reports of sexual orientation discrimination, although a study by Waldo (1999) failed to find this relationship. In his study of n=287 LGB workers, Waldo found that supportive organizational policies did not influence reports of discrimination but found that organizational climate played a more direct role in predicting discrimination. In his study, discrimination was operationalized as having "direct" (e.g., anti-gay jokes) and "indirect" (e.g., assumptions of heterosexuality) components, and LGB employees were more likely to experience both these forms of discrimination when they reported their organization was tolerant of heterosexism. The contradictory findings of these studies may be due to the different instruments used to measure workplace discrimination, as emerging instruments on heterosexism vary with respect to psychometric properties and construct validity (Croteau, 1996).

1.7 The purpose of current study

Exploratory work is crucial in a relatively new area of research, because a body of descriptive information about the phenomena being studied must be generated before researchers can identify key variables and develop measures suitable for use in quantitative research. Qualitative approaches, with their emphases on open-ended ideographic inquiry and discovery, are ideal for generating such new information, as concepts and models can emerge from the unique experiences and perspectives of the population being studied in ways which a strict nomothetic approach prohibits. The qualitative approach allows for the possibility that concepts and models might emerge that differ from the existing ones that have been transplanted from research into similar but crucially different areas, and which thus might not possess the validity that is both central and crucial to creating an informed view of the phenomena and populations under consideration (Sang, 1989).

Predominantly, the existing research in the area under investigation in the current study has focused on the experiences of 'coming out' versus 'staying in the closet

'within occupational domains, and the views of self and identity within this context; little direct research has focused on exploring the in-depth experiences of Gay and Lesbian employees as both individuals and as parts of minority groups within occupational settings whilst encompassing environmental and individual factors. An arguable irony of the focus of previous research being predominantly on whether to disclose or not as the key factor in gay identity at work is that this possibly reinforces the centrality of the heterocentric world view; placing the onus of responsibility with the LGB worker rather than framing the heterocentric perspective as the social construct that it is; the current study seeks, in some small way, to begin to help to redress this balance.

Furthermore, the samples used in previous research have consisted of gay, lesbian, bisexual and some transsexual participants; taking into account that that bisexual individuals go through very different experiences and thought processes compared to the other groups (Herek, 2004), , to assist with homogeneity the sample comprised exclusively of gay men and lesbians. Thus the aim of the current study was to gain an in-depth understanding of workplace experiences of alternative sexual identity for gay men and lesbian women in the context of a heterocentric society using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith & Osborn, 2003, Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009),

2 Method

2.1 Design

2.1.1 Qualitative Approach and IPA

The literature on sexual identity is comprised of significantly more quantitative studies compared to qualitative studies. Nevonen and Broberg (2000) have argued that while quantitative research has enabled a great deal of progress, it has limitations, for example: since quantitative research often utilizes closed-structure reporting methods, participant responses are limited by the parameters set by the researcher, which in turn have commonly been drawn from prior quantitative research; the danger of this is that reified ideas can create a self-serving bias which may ultimately lead to a fragmented picture and possibly inaccurate picture of the area under investigation (Ibid). In thinking about how to best approach the phenomena under consideration, it was deemed that only ideographic data would allow for meaningful insight into what are intensely personal experiences. A qualitative methodology was selected for having the advantages of allowing in-depth explorative study of phenomena that are not easily quantifiable, and because this allows for the emergence of unanticipated findings (Willig, 2001).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (e.g., Smith & Osborn, 2003) was the chosen qualitative method for its consistency with the research aim of examining how people make sense of their own life experiences (Smith *et al.* 2009). The interpretative aspect of IPA employs what is known as a "double hermeneutic" in which the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their experiences (Smith *et al.* 2009, p.1). The phenomenological element of IPA is focused on "exploring experience in its own terms" rather than attempting to reduce it to "predefined or overlaid abstract categories" (Ibid). IPA was also deemed

the most appropriate approach because of the ways in which it considers both the individual and the broader context; both the potentially objective and the socially constructed, which allows for interpretation of the individual experience in ways which can generate potentially useful extrapolations about the smaller and larger populations to which the individual participant belongs; that is, IPA is concerned with the particular, with revealing something about the experience of each of the individuals involved, and with being able to say something in detail about the participant group. Smith *et al.* (2009 p.29) explains this aspect of IPA thus: the "commitment to the particular operates at two levels. Firstly, there is a commitment to detail and depth of analysis", and secondly: "IPA is committed to understanding how particular experiential phenomena (an event, process or relationship) have been understood from the perspective of particular people, in a particular context."

The aim of IPA is not to make premature generalizations about larger populations, but rather to arrive at more general claims cautiously, and only after the analysis of individual cases. Finally, IPA was selected as an analysis tool over others as IPA is more psychological, concerned with giving a more detailed and nuanced account of the personal experiences of a smaller sample (Smith *et al.* 2009), which was felt to be more in keeping with the study's aims. IPA recognizes that cognitions are not transparently available from verbal reports, it engages with the analytic process in the hope of being able to say something about the sense- and meaning making involved in such thinking.

Kahn (1990) proposed that job role characteristics were an important component of psychological meaningfulness for individuals. Specifically, a given job type includes work dynamics, levels of challenge, degree of variety in skill sets used, and other task related aspects of the job that can influence an employee's level of interaction. Keeping this in mind, job role was included as a criterion which required careful consideration in this study, and as part of this it was important to employ participants whose work involved at least a moderate level of social interaction with co-workers on at least a semi-regular basis, as the role relationship dynamics to disclosure in the workplace would prove exceptionally difficult to study at this level with participants whose occupations were naturally quite solitary. Further, supportive versus non-supportive environments where distinguished from the self-report of the participants. Non-supportive environments were distinguished by negative attitude or behavior from co-workers or the organization itself, through observable discrimination and heterosexist bias. Conversely, supportive environments were categorized as positive, with no experience of discrimination and where the heterocentric world view was not the default cultural norm within the organization.

2.2 Participants

Purposive sampling was deemed the most appropriate recruitment method for the selection of participants as it was required that they were gay and not only currently employed but also had a reasonable amount of work history to draw on. The sample, n=5, were all self-disclosed Gay or Lesbian men and women. They ranged in age from 30 to 40 years who have been in employment, whether full time or part-time, and with no significant periods of unemployment, since leaving full-time education. Smith *et al.* (2009) suggest adopting very small sample sizes, and even single case studies in some instance, because the primary concern of IPA is to elicit detailed

accounts of individual experience; in accordance with this protocol, those chosen for the study formed a relatively homogenous group, as this typically increases the depth and thus the richness of the data which emerge (Ibid). All participants were born and had been resided in the UK for their whole life and had English as their primary language; this last point is significant because, with qualitative research relying so heavily on language to convey experience, there was concern that the richness and subtlety of meaning in the individual's experience could be lost through the use of a translator, a factor which could readily confound the findings of such a small-sample, exploratory study. Table 1, below, shows several demographics of the participants.

Table 1: Participant characteristics and demographics in line of interview order (Alias names have been used to protect participant confidentiality)

Order of interview	Participant	Age	Sexuality status	Occupation	Supportive / non-supportive environment
1	Sam	38	Gay	Actor	Supportive
2	Danny	35	Gay	Council-service worker	Supportive
3	Ronnie	30	Gay	Receptionist	Non-supportive
4	Sophie	32	Lesbian	Personal assistant	Supportive
5	Emma	34	Lesbian	Dentist	Non-supportive

2.2.1 Ethical considerations- Confidentiality and Anonymity

Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of West London – (see appendix 1) for supporting documentation. Participants were fully informed about confidentiality and its limits. Participants were also made aware that whilst quotes would be used in the research, all identifying information such as names and places would be either removed from the transcripts or altered so as to be in no way traceable back to themselves. There was slight risk that taking part may be distressing for participants, which was addressed by providing information beforehand about what taking part would involve and the topics that would be covered, so that potential participants could make informed decisions about whether to continue with their involvement. Participants were made aware that they could ask for a break at any time, and had the right not to answer particular questions if they did not want to, and it was their right to withdraw from the study at any time. A debrief period followed each of the interviews, in during which it was discussed with each participant how they had found being interviewed; Debrief information was then

given which detailed sources of support such as organizations dealing with LGB discriminations.

2.3 Materials

Semi-structured interviews were developed through discussions with the lecturer supervising the study and in accordance with published guidelines (such as, for example, Woods, 1993; Smith & Osborn, 2003). In line with the recommendations of Polits *et al.* (2001) that a 'trial run' be conducted in designing qualitative research, a pilot study was carried out a priori to gather preliminary data and help guide practical changes whilst keeping in mind the relevant areas of the existing LGB literature. Through the exploratory process, the following five key areas were identified as being central to the primary questions of the study: How do participants currently view and describe their identity; how do they view their sexuality at work; what are the participant's views about and experiences of contact with homosexual colleagues; what is their perception of homophobia in the work environment toward themselves and others; what are participant's views and thought processes regarding their sexuality in relation to progression and decision making within a work and career context.

There were several amendments made post-piloting with regards to the wording and the interviews schedule: prior to commencing the actual interview process, it was decided to transcribe and identify key themes from each interview before proceeding to the next, as a way to inform and focus the research process. Following each interview the participant was asked for feedback to identify ambiguities and difficult questions. This helped in defining more clear prompts and probes to help guide each interview direction and expand on areas which needed further clarification. Whilst the interview questions were generally run in this sequence, there were instances where they had to be adjusted to facilitate the rapport between the participant and the researcher. The questions and prompts used as the starting point for each interview were as follows:

· Tell me about yourself?
Prompt: how do you identify yourself?
· Can you tell me a bit about your experiences of work?
Prompt: What has it been like for you?
· What is it like being gay /lesbian in your workplace?
Prompt: How do you feel about that?
· Have you ever been aware of any homosexual colleagues in your workplace?
Prompt: Tell me a little bit about that. How does that make you feel?
· Have you perceived any homophobia towards yourself or others at work?
Prompt: What was it like and how does that make you feel?
· What influence. How has your sexuality had, if any influence within your career journey?
Prompt: How important is that to you and how does that make you feel?

2.4 Procedure- Data collection

The actual interviews were conducted via 'Skype' videophone software, of which only the audio function was used to allow for a greater sense of freedom and privacy for the participant. Minocha (2011) has supported the use of telephone interviewing as a way to elicit responses with potentially greater depth and richness than might otherwise be the case where the researcher and participant are in the same room. Participants were encouraged to be as elaborative as they wished in answering the questions. A further advantage of Skype for the researcher is that it makes digital recording immediately accessible and available. The recorded data later transcribed verbatim by the researcher using 'Dragon' software which facilitates typing via voice control and later analyzed using IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2003; Smith *et al.* 2009).

2.4.1 Individual case analysis

In keeping with the idiographic perspective of IPA, each interview was first analysed in-depth individually (Smith *et al.* 2009). Each recording was listened to at least once before transcription began, then each interview was transcribed and read several times. Initial annotations were made in one margin, with exploratory comments describing initial thoughts about the content, language use and more conceptual, interrogative comments. Each transcript was then re-read and the second margin used to note emergent themes, drawing on both the transcript and the initial analyses. Time and diligence were taken over this process, with each transcript being read through and annotated a number of times, typically with a number of days elapsing between each analysis to reduce the chances of missing key factors due to over familiarity with the data. Each interview was analysed in this way until all five interviews had been analysed to the point were no further major or subordinate themes were apparent in the data.

2.4.2 Emergent themes

At this stage the emergent themes were listed chronologically and then arranged to form clusters of related themes. Smith *et al.* (2009) detail how super-ordinate themes can be identified through abstraction (putting like with like and developing a new name for the cluster); subsumption (where an emergent theme itself becomes a super-ordinate theme as it draws other related themes towards it); polarization (examining transcripts for oppositional relationships); contextualization (identifying the contextual or narrative elements within an analysis); numeration (the frequency with which a theme is supported) and function (themes are examined for their function).

2.4.3 Cross case analysis

The next stage involved looking for patterns across cases. This was achieved by drawing up a list of themes for the group, and clustering these into Global themes representing shared higher-order qualities. The global table of themes for the group is shown in Analysis section 3.3

2.4.4 Validity and quality

Assessing the quality of qualitative research requires different criteria than those for assessing the validity and reliability of quantitative work (Barker, Pistrang & Elliott, 2002). There are a number of available guidelines for doing this. Smith *et al.* (2009) particularly recommend the Yardley (2000) four principles; sensitivity to context; commitment and rigor; transparency and coherence; impact and importance. These have formed the benchmark of the analysis process.

3 Analysis and Discussion

3.1 Overview

Four global themes emerged from analysis of the data; exploration of these and their constituent superordinate themes (see Table 2 below) will form the basis of this section, with each theme illustrated by verbatim quotes from the interviews. The quotes used do not cover all aspects of the participants' experiences, but were selected for their relevance to the research questions. It is recognized that these themes are only one account of the experiences of sexual identity of the participants within the workplace; it is acknowledged that they are a subjective interpretation. While these were themes common to the five accounts, there were also areas of divergence and difference, some of which are commented upon and explored further in the discussion. In presenting the verbatim extracts some minor changes have been made to improve readability: minor hesitations, word repetitions and utterances such as "erm" have mostly been removed except where they were deemed to be integral to the communication itself.

Table 2: Global Themes and related Superordinate Themes		
Global Themes	Superordinate Themes	Representing quotes - participant and line number
Negative affect from being Stereotyped	Fear	[P3,L65]
	Anger	[P5,L71]
	Anxiety-stress	[P1, L67]
Strategies Employed to Manage Sense of Identity	Fabrications	[P1, L101]
	Subtle Reference	[P4, L98]

Table 2: Global Themes and related Superordinate Themes		
Global Themes	Superordinate Themes	Representing quotes - participant and line number
Awareness and Visibility	Presence of other sexual minorities	[P4, L74]
	Disclosure- variability in people	[P5, L129]
Sexuality as a 'Special Status"	Being Treated differently	[P1, L94]
	Opportunities &Benefits	[P2,L138]

3.2 Negative Affect from being stereotyped

This global theme encompassed the negative feelings experienced by the participants. They reported feeling disgusted and angry at being stereotyped. Anxiety – stress was further evident in the discussed experiences as a direct result of what witnessed as experienced by other individuals. The experience of stereotyping within this group is related to minority stress (Brooks, 1981) discussed below.

3.2.1 Fear

For the participants, fears were observed to arise prior to social interactions; fear occurs within the individual as he or she considers how to manage their stigma in public. Emma represented the feelings of all participants in regard to this: "I am always afraid to even think about it, what if they judge me? The girls at work are just so judgmental they won't understand."[p5, L56]

Sophie further explained: "I do always think about it. What if I have to tell them? What if they take it the wrong way? It makes me worry and sometimes afraid of the consequences."[P4, L48] When asked to elaborate on this she said: "they would just treat me differently, because of their preconceptions of a typical lesbian they won't be the same with me."[P4, L52]

These feelings of fear may also have an adverse effect on an array of work, life, and career attitudes and outcomes, including life satisfaction, job satisfaction and organizational commitment, as suggested by Meyer (2003). From this it is reasonable to suggest that these feelings may spill over into the home life of this group of people. Ronnie explained this further: "Every time I try not to think about it, but when I'm at home, especially just before I have to go to work, I get uneasy. I

would just think about all the shit I will have to put up with today. Like the uncomfortable questions and the 'gay' innuendos. I just sometimes get scared thinking about. What if they ever meet my partner?"[P3, L65]

Participants reported feeling angry about having to go through emotional turmoil due to prejudicial attitudes. They feel that they were discriminated against because the heterosexist paradigm assigned them to a group without their having any choice in the matter, whether the person behaving with prejudice knew of the participant's homosexuality or not. This was sometimes most acute for participants who were not out at work were forced to witness homophobic treatment of others. Emma described this: "it makes me think, how they dare judge other gay people! Nobody is perfect; need to look at themselves more instead of criticizing and digging in other people's business."[P5, L71] When asked how that makes her feel she said: "it makes me so angry! I would love them to just stop making those derogatory jokes and comments."[P5, L74] She expressed strong feelings of anger and frustration at having to conceal this because she cannot openly express her feelings without 'outing' herself.

Levine and Leonard's (1984) observation that "open" homosexuals may not experience these negative feelings to the same degree, considers the frustration expressed by Emma, and suggest that the core feeling, in this case anger, can be made worse through being compromised in its expression. They further noted that for individuals in supportive work environments the feelings of anger appeared to stem from frustration at heterosexism itself; something which appeared easier to accept because it was not compounded by the perceived need to conceal the feeling. Sam represented this by saying: "It makes me angry, but that is just part of the package and you will get this everywhere you go. It is so frustrating to deal with the feelings, especially if it is on an everyday basis, but I just try and not let it get to me."[P1, L50]

3.2.2 Anxiety-stress

Anxiety and stress is a reccurring theme in the participant's stories, whether they were in supportive or non-supportive environments. It is interesting to observe that whilst Sam was open to his colleagues about his sexuality, he still felt that they would stereotype him. Sam talked about how anxious this makes him feel: "Although most of the people know that I'm gay, they would still make these little jokes which are negative and upsetting to me on the basis that I am gay. It is very stressful, I don't know, maybe it's because I'm just an anxious individual who is prone to stress, but I do know that these situations make me feel very uncomfortable and they get me very worked up about the whole thing." [P1, L67]

The participants who mostly discussed the negative work stress associated with homosexual stereotypes were the ones who were in a non-supportive environment. Ronnie talked about the anxiety and stress that he experienced: "Oh gosh, it is very stressful. Some people are just so stupid! They make the silliest comments and that just stresses me out. I'm like… oh my god I cannot do this today! For this reason and this reason alone, I don't look forward to going to work."[P3, L88]

Further, Emma talked about having to constantly think about the central importance to her of her sexual identity and how powerless she feels over the heterosexist world view held by most of her colleagues and, she presumes from general experience, the majority of her patients. She explains how working in a small, tight-knit community makes it more difficult for her: "I'm always aware… I also feel like I'm always on the edge. I want to be myself and talk about my partner...I want to be honest and open…but I feel that if something gets out or they suspect something, if the word gets out I don't think my clients will keep coming to me. It is a very small community within dentistry, you know... Everybody knows everyone." [P5, L80] It would be very awkward and I don't think I could deal with the stress of it all." This supports Ragins (2004) suggestion that moderators such as size of the community can directly influence disclosure-disconnects. It could be argued that the more salient the identity and the smaller the community, the more anxiety-stress is experienced by the individual.

Minority stress theory which was first coined by Brooks (1981) fits well within this theme as it suggests that simply being a member of the marginalized minority group is sufficient in itself to generate anxiety and stress without necessarily having to experience any direct discrimination. This can be made worse in small communities, where minority stress can result from alienation brought about through the internationalisation of negative societal evaluations due to their constant reaffirmation in the immediate environment with little or no positive construct affirmation for balance. Taken together these conditions represent the strain inherent in being a member of a minority whose values, needs, culture, and experiences are at odds with those of the majority. Mayer (1995) suggested that minority stress is comprised of three components: internalized discrimination towards the minority to which one belongs as a result of extensive prolonged exposure to negative cultural beliefs; perceived stigma of being treated unfairly; and exposure to prejudice, the severity of which can significantly impact on affect. This also supports Waldo's (1999) study where employees were reported to be as likely to experience direct and indirect discrimination whether in a tolerant environment or not.

These findings also raise important questions about the role of legislation in enforcing equality: organizations with an open and supportive culture are likely to design and implement equality practices willingly and perhaps even before being prompted by law, and as such as likely to be staffed by less prejudiced individuals, meaning that it is not necessarily the legal safeguards which reduce discrimination; whereas less progressive companies, where equality is merely token due to legal requirement, may well still possess a prejudiced culture, making discrimination a daily reality whatever the law has to say on the matter.

3.2.3 Strategies Employed to Manage Sense of identity

Disclosure of one's sexual orientation does not necessarily overcome problems associated with identity management: Kitzinger (1991) found that individuals who have revealed their sexual orientation at work may adjust their appearance or personal stories at work to avoid falling into stereotypical impressions of gay individuals. Therefore, regardless of being in a supportive or non-supportive environment, GL employees are observed to engage in complex identity-impression-management-strategies in their interactions with coworkers, of which two, fabrication

and subtle referencing, are the most salient in current study. This theme is strongly rooted in Identity Theories, Specifically Categorization Theory (Tajfel, 1981) and Social Identity Theory (Turner, 1982), as discussed in section 1.3

3.2.4 Fabrications

Woods (1993) presents findings of individuals fabricating heterosexual identities in order to avoid questions and gossip which may interfere with work production and in turn enhance work related stress. These dual identities are maintained through differing degrees of disclosure or through the fabrication of a complete heterosexual identity. Interestingly, whilst it could be assumed that in a supportive environment the need for fabrications would be eradicated as there would be a congruent identity state; Woods observed that individuals still report using this strategy to various degrees. Sam represents this: "Once you tell one lie you have to just carry on. Sometimes there is just no need for them to know so I just play along. Especially if I need to get that role and I know they might judge me if I behave like a typical 'gay guy'". [P1, L101]

An alternative, or perhaps part of a compound explanation for fabrication has already been touched on above in the discussion of minority stress: Rostosky and Riggle (2002) support the idea that the internalisation of negative views of one's own minority group can lead to concealment, wholly or in part, even when the work environment is considered to be supportive; it is the negative self-judgment that is the inhibitory factor. Danny gives insight into this when he expresses his dislike of the idea of being camp: "you know, I don't actually like the idea of gayness or campness. I know that it's a big part of it but I… I don't think it is a nice concept." [P2, L59]

Further in line with Woods' (1993) suggestion of an "avoidance" strategy, participants disclosed attempts to evade the issue of their sexuality by self-editing, censoring, and telling half-truth. They report maintaining a social distance in the workplace and avoidance of issues surrounding their personal lives. These tactics are clearly expressed by Emma: "you know, I would never go out with them for drinks after work, and you know they ask me questions like, so have you got a boyfriend? And I would be like, no. Then they would try and set me up with someone and I just have to dodge the issue." [P5, L94] Ronnie's account also demonstrates how he tries to appear asexual and reveal nothing at all about his sexuality to his coworkers "I just don't tell them a straight answer, I just go off the subject or pretend I didn't hear them."[P3, L98]

3.3 Subtle References

None of the participants were direct in disclosing their identity, however "integration" strategy as proposed by Woods (1994) was observed to be employed by those who were in a supportive environment. Sam said: "People are quite clever generally, in figuring out, so it's enough for me just to drop hints or talk about the gay pub down the road." [P1, L62] Sophie also talked about her experience of bringing her partner to organizational events as well as displaying pictures of them together: "When they talk about their wives or children, I would just sort of mention the dog that me and Lucy have and how we take her for walks."[P4, L98] Danny explains that this is due

to the need for relief from the stress of ambiguity: "I just need to get it off my chest and stop the formation of these 'web of lies.'"[P2, L52]

It should also be noted that employees often make statements and provide affirmations about their heterosexuality at work by wearing a wedding ring, discussing their family, and displaying family photographs, and these actions are not construed in sexual terms, but LGB employees who engage in comparable activities are often viewed as "flaunting their sexual orientation," and are advised to "keep their sexual identity to themselves" (Friskopp & Silverstein, 1996; Woods, 1994). This behaviour, whilst its perpetrators, by its nature, do not consider it as prejudice, perpetuates the heterocentric world view without which most homophobia, at least that of the default variety based in heterosexism, would arguably not exist (Ibid).

Moreover, LG employees who have disclosed their sexual identity may be shunned from social interactions with colleagues who are uncomfortable interacting with them because of their orientation, but workers who hide their sexual orientation may need to maintain a social distance from their colleagues in order to conceal their sexual identity, thus limiting the development of potentially valuable working relationships, and in the latter case, possibly missing out on new social relationships too. Emma provides a good example: "They always invite me out but I have to refuse, I even don't use the same changing rooms as them in case they start questioning me."[P5, L106]

Thus it follows that these employees may face social discrimination and exclusion from valuable networking relationships irrespective of whether or not they have disclosed their sexual identity in the workplace; Woods (1994) observed that high-ranking positions frequently involve work-related social functions that, by invite or implication, expect the presence of a spouse or a date, and that this may create considerable stress for closeted LGB employees who do not want to disclose their identity but risk speculations about their sexual identity if they consistently go "solo" to these required social events.

3.3.1 Awareness and Visibility

This global theme encompasses the awareness of other sexual minority members within the work environment. Further, awareness of the costs and benefits in revealing their sexual orientation to others is a key issue for the participants. These relate to Stigma Theory discussed earlier, and further findings rooted in Social Network Theory (Granovetter, 1985) are discussed in section 3.5.

3.3.2 Presence of other sexual minorities

Participants reported being highly aware of other sexual minorities within their working environment, and it was observed that in the supportive environment there was more interpersonal contact between them, which promoted positive feelings and encouraged disclosure. Sophie explains how being in contact with another openly gay individual made her feel more secure in disclosing her identity: "He was the first gay man I met [at work]. We had a chat, he told me about his partner, and I was like, cool, so there is another one on the team! It was nice to know. It made me more relaxed about opening up." [P4, L74]

Sam: "I have always been aware of other homosexuals at work! If anything I always try and encourage my boss to hire more of them... (laughter)." [P1, L101] Sam further talked about the impact it had on his career journey: "This is where I met gay men for the first time, before that I had not encountered them or interacted in any way. I don't know, but, I was naturally drawn to this, it made me feel safe and I felt like I could be myself. Maybe that is why I chose this profession. I don't know?" [P1, L120]

Nevertheless, for participants in non-supportive environments, whilst there was an awareness of other sexual minority members, they didn't have such a strong interaction as in the supportive environment. Emma disclosed how she knows another gay male dentist who she looked up to for being open about his sexuality, nevertheless she didn't feel safe in disclosing her identity to him or others: "He was openly gay, and I think that is awesome! Everyone was cool about it, but that is his life and he is really respected in the industry you know, he's been around. It doesn't affect my career at the end of the day." [P5, L62] This would suggest that the visibility and interaction between this group of workers is supportive of the identity and may provide a connection.

3.3.3 Disclosure - variability in people

Participants reported that central in their thinking process around how, when, to whom to disclose, or whether to disclose at all, was the strength of the connection they felt with a co-worker, or the degree of empathy they sensed in a situation. Sam talks about this process when he first enters an interview for an acting role. He speaks of having little or no trust in people when he first meets them in this context, so he chooses to hide his sexual identity and act more straight: "When I attend an interview for a role, because I don't necessarily know them I will act more butch, more straight, basically." [P1, L132] Sam goes on to explain how it affects key opportunities in getting acting roles: "You know, a gay guy never gets the straight role, never in my whole career have I seen this, well maybe once or twice, but they will just think that I cannot do the role." [P1, L136] He further explains: "once I get the role I can slowly start opening up to people who I know won't go about telling everyone." [P1, L 139]

As discussed earlier the environmental social structure and power dynamics can play a significant role in the decision of whether or not to disclose; Emma, for example, talked about how the hierarchical structure of her work as she and how dentists, in higher positions than the other staff in the practice, typically do not engage in prejudiced behaviour: "the nurses are always gossiping, they are always chatting and judging other people, and the dentists are more laid back. I don't really hear any negative comments from them, but it's the nurses that I spend most time with and they are the trouble for me really." [P5, L129]

This relates to Social Network Theory (Granovetter, 1985), which assumes that people are embedded within a network of relationships that create opportunities for unconstrained individual actions, and which have far reaching effects on the overall climate. Given the potential stigma associated with revealing gay identity, individuals may consider the relationship networks of others and how those relationships may

impact on their own position in the organisation should they choose to disclose. Extrapolating from Granovetter, the implication is that developing a strong and supportive network of mentors, friends and colleagues, and a strong sense that they will support them against any potential backlash from people outside of their own network, would encourage the decision to disclose.

Ragins (2004) has suggested that such disclosures can aid in reducing stigma through close and conscious contact that prejudiced individuals might previously not have experienced. Similarly, 'passing' may help to perpetuate institutionalised stigmatisation of gay identity because continued invisibility of stigma helps to underpin the heterosexist world view, which in turn can increase the probability and intensity of indirect discrimination. Ragins further points out that LGB employees who have not disclosed their sexual identity increase their risk indirect discrimination due to the fact that the perpetrators of these actions are unaware that their colleague is gay, and thus do not censor their comments or actions. Whilst Ragins' evidence supports this as being the case, it is contentious because it arguably places some of the responsibility for the discrimination they experience on the shoulders of LG employees themselves; as though challenging discrimination is an inherent part of the "job description" of being gay.

3.4 Sexuality as a 'Special Status"

While previous themes generally have their roots in negative literature, a more positive theme emerged from the interviews with participants who are in a supportive work environments, which suggests that GL employees view being 'out' as a positive status that is beneficial to themselves and to others; this involves the awareness of different treatment received by others, and added opportunities and work related benefits that can result from 'positive discrimination'. Nonetheless, this issue is deeply complex, the most obvious problem emerging from 'being glad that you're gay', being the tokenism employed by some companies which seek to benefit materially and/or in terms of public image from the presence of members of minority groups in their organisation.

3.4.1 Different treatment

Participants who disclosed their identity to their fellow workers felt that their treatment was different in a positive way because of their sexuality; Sam said: "They know that they cannot do that [openly demonstrate discomfort] so they treat me with more care. I mean, I know it's not just that they are afraid, I guess that they just see my sexuality as different, exciting, and that's why they want to be friends with me and go on lunch and so on." [P1, L94]

Danny mentioned his supervisor's comments: "He actually said to me that I am good for the company's figures; because I am a minority it looks good on paper and makes the office more diverse. I know he appreciates me because of this and lets me get away with more, [laugh]" [P2, L138]. When asked how does that make him feel, Danny replied: "Special I guess, I view it not just in terms of 'good for the company' but it's good for the gay community." [P2, L141]. However, whilst for some these experiences are interpreted as positive, for others, those with differing views of what equality means, this may be viewed as negative; the debate regarding

tokenism is still relatively young and small in the literature on homosexuality in the workplace, but Williamson (1993), Woods (1994), Ragins (2004), and numerous theorists in the broader field of prejudice and discrimination as a whole (see, for example, Smart & Wegner, 2000), discuss the pros and cons of legally mandated diversity, with one of the strongest arguments against 'positive discrimination' being the backlash from non-minority workers who may consider themselves discriminated against as a result; something which can arguably only make the situation worse in the long term.

3.4.2 Opportunities and Benefits

This theme encompasses all of the experiences related to opportunities gained from belonging to a sexual minority group. Sam talked about learning from gained experiences of dealing with discrimination in the past, and how this had been significant in helping him gain a stronger identity: "I feel going through this has made me become a stronger person, most definitely, I think it has helped me be aware of what's out there and who to talk to, to get what I want." [P1, L99]. Sam also speaks about the empowerment he feels as a result of changing social attitudes and the framework of legal protection now in place: "They know they cannot do that, because now we have [legal] rights. We can get married and even adopt children! It puts us in a better position now than before. We really can do anything that other individuals can." [P1, L157]

3.5 Further Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate the experiences of gay and lesbian individuals in supportive and non-supportive work environments using an in-depth idiographic approach with the use of IPA. The analysis resulted in four master themes, of which the first three: Negative Affect of being Stereotyped; Identity Management strategies; and Awareness and Visibility, were found to be consistent with existing theory and literature, and were discussed mainly in relation to the stigma, identity, and stereotyping and prejudice reported in participants' accounts of their experiences in employment environments. Further discussed in relation to these first three themes, were unexpected findings that emerged relating to Minority Stress and Social Network theory. The fourth and final global theme, Sexuality as a 'special status', provided some interesting findings that demonstrate positive aspects of being a member of this particular minority group in terms of identity in the workplace.

As LG employees commonly face discrimination in the workplace to greater or lesser degree but almost without exception during their working lives, discrimination which can be subtle in form but potent in effect, the stigma of homosexuality creates a unique challenge for homosexual people at work. Issues stemming from this challenge include but are not limited to: lack of control over the disclosure process; disclosure-disconnects that involve differing degrees of disclosure of sexual identity at home and at work; the assumptions of heterosexuality that can increase the prevalence and intensity of indirect forms of discrimination, which in turn may lead to minority stress; and possible backlash from non-minority colleagues as product of positive discrimination. Keeping in mind that negative emotions have been shown to correlate with lowered performance (National Defence Research Institute 1993;

Williamson, 1993), organizations can benefit from a more egalitarian culture both materially though increased productivity and profit, and none materially through better staff moral and an enhanced working environment; the latter, of course, contributing to the former. Thus it ought not to be left to equality legislation to force the issue on employers, but would be simple good business sense for organisations to take a progressive position in reducing all types of prejudice and discrimination.

While LGB employees share many of the challenges faced by other stigmatised groups, they face additional pressures and reactions stemming from an underlying core of assumptions about sexual identity; whereas, for example, it is widely considered repugnant to insult or undermine someone based on physical disability, and whilst racism is increasingly frowned upon with even those who are racist commonly concealing it in many work environments on the assumption that they may be challenged or reprimanded, homosexuality is still considered by many to be abnormal. The unique challenges presented to LG workers, such as the need for strategies to deal with the disclosure of identity and the interaction with colleagues who may or may not be homophobic, also presents unique challenges to employers that are arguably not well enough addressed by generic equalities legislation and training, for example: while the 2010 equalities act does offer strong legal protection against discrimination based on sexuality, this is of no use to the lesbian or gay worker who has to suffer the homophobic indirect discrimination of colleagues because they do not want to disclose what is, at root, the personal matter of their sexuality. Research about this will not only enrich diversity literature but will also benefit practicing managers who may be aware of invisible differences with groups they manage.

3.6 Limitations - Strengths and Weaknesses

In considering if the limitations of the sample in this study, Rothblum (1995) defends the generalisability of the results from this type of sample by stating: "Although participants of such studies are sometimes considered non-representative or non-random... they are representative of lesbians and gay men who are active in the communities"(p.2), further suggesting that those who are 'out' are most important because they are visible to the communities and most affect how heterosexual people view gay men and lesbians. However, participants might be higher in risk-taking and willingness to trust others because they have chosen to open up to the researcher; this is likely to also be true of those participants in this and other studies who are 'out' in the workplace. Furthermore, it could be argued that use of a narrow range of participants in a single qualitative study is not problematic because generalizing to a wider population is not the primary purpose of such research, but rather it is to discover information about the work lives of this population through analysis of their experiences. There is a case to be put for the generalisability in terms of comparison with existing and future research, but this is more concerned with correlations or contrasts across numerous studies as a specialised body of literature develops; and it is this point which can fairly be put forward as reasonable justification for such as study, as the need to reduce all prejudice is inarguable, and the marginal areas of the field will only cease to be marginal as the literature builds, and for that to happen the research has to begin somewhere.

3.7 Findings, Implications, and Future Directions

Issues concerning disclosure of sexual identity in the work place are complex but can certainly be better understood and disentangled to some degree through an increase in research exploring the lived experiences of individuals who face these issues. Additionally, keeping in mind that attitudes about sexual minorities, equality laws, and organizational policies are continually changing, and that there is a significant reciprocal determinism at work in this dynamic process, it is also important to examine the issues of sexual identity in the workplace from the perspective of non-minority workers, organisational power dynamics, and the place of homophobia and heterosexism as specialist sub-disciplines within the wider field of stereotyping and prejudice as a whole.

The present study has important implications for the recruitment and retention of gay men and lesbians in the workforce as the lack of visibility contributes to a vicious circle: the workplace appears LGB unfriendly and so LGB employees hide their sexual orientation and gender identity; the employer believes that they have no LGB employees and so there is no need to make their workplace LGB friendly. From this it would appear that communication is vital to good business and consistent quality as to continue to marginalise and exclude the significant percentage of LGB adults in the UK population from so many places of employment could prove to be commercial suicide in an age of increasing egalitarianism. One part of addressing the problem might be the application of Schneider's (1987) attraction-attrition theory, which suggests that for an organization to attract, select and retain people from this minority group, they must demonstrate through obvious cues that there are policies and organisational support in place, this being the key in promoting an organisation as a place in which gay and lesbian people would be happy to work.

Future research in this area should aim to explore the experiences of sexual minority groups in higher status and leadership positions and through this decision-making and policy development could be examined more closely. Conversely, though it would be a challenge to find participants, the experiences of people in such roles who do not belong to sexual minority groups would also give much needed insight into how prejudice is perpetuated from the top down. Such relationships between decision makers and those who serve under them are intriguing, and future research might examine the extent to which they reflect social roles, gender roles, occupational choices and socioeconomic artefacts within personality and identity.

Furthermore, although this would provide valuable insight, a relatively narrow lens is still being applied within qualitative research; workers are viewed primarily in terms of their work role, which fails to recognize that disclosure happens at work and home domains (and that work role is itself often impacted by endemic heterosexist prejudice throughout industry). Considering that the significance of non-work domains has been recognized by work-family researchers Edwards & Rothbard (2000) who observe that sexual orientation differs to other stigmas in that it commonly crosses domains and involves all types of relationships that the gay individual engages in; that, for example, a disabled employee is not likely to face the same stigma at home as at work, which is sometimes not the case for the LGB worker, further examination is needed this particular area.

In sum, the findings of this study do have potentially important implications for the recruitment and retention of gay men and lesbians in the workforce, but one word of caution needs to be offered, which is that it should also be noted that differences in the US and UK populations might reflect the differences in laws, cultural attitudes, and direct exposure to this invisible minority group discussed in the existing literature. Given that much of the existing research on gay identity has been conducted in the US, the possibility that, for example, experience of stigma varies significantly dependent on whether the environment is supporting or not, needs to be considered and can only really be commented on in any meaningful sense through cross cultural comparison; something which further supports the need for further research in this very specific area of the psychology of sexuality identity.

3.8 Reflexivity

Upon starting this research I thought I had some a reasonable understanding of the issues gay and lesbian people face at work due to my personal experience of my own identity, which has led me to retaliate for being labelled with a minority status; be it a sexual or ethnic one, as I have never felt I truly belong to any specific category within either. However, during the development of this research I came to realise that I needed to put aside this rebellious way of thinking so as not to draw premature conclusions, to prejudge, or to misinterpret what the participants were really trying to say. Having a large pool of LGB friends, who I have followed through their journeys of disclosure, I feel it had gained insight into and experience of the communication skills required to gain an openness from this group of individuals, and this proved particularly evident in the interviews where often the participants related to me and used phrases such as "you know what I mean" in a way that was more than merely a manner of speech but which conveyed a sense that they felt that I had gone thorough similar experiences. In post interview discussion it became apparent that several participants had assumed that I was gay myself, something which, perhaps ironically, I neither confirmed nor denied, but it was obvious that this definitely helped them to feel at ease and share more openly than they perhaps would have with a researcher who they did not feel was empathic to their experience.

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